

The following is an interview with Vera Gissing, held in Washington D.C. on April 22, 2006. The interviewer is Sidney Bolkosky.

Uh, can you tell me your name please, and where you were born.

My name is Vera Anna Gissing, used to be Vera Diamantova. I was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

In the city of Prague?

Um, well, in a hospital in Prague, because we actually lived on the fringes of the city in a little town called Celakovice. But um, my mother had me in a proper hospital in Prague.

And what do you remember about life before the war?

I remember an awful lot, because um, I had a very happy childhood. Um, we had a very close family. My father and my oldest sister—who was four and a half years my senior—her name was uh, Eva. And they were very close. My sister was very serious and studious and I was a ragamuffin who always got into scrapes. And—but um, I was very close to mother and um, we were an incredibly happy family.

How large...

There wasn't a cloud on my horizon in my childhood as far as I can...

How large was the family?

How large?

Just you and your sister?

Just me and my sister uh, my father and mother and a few pussycats, which were in my family.

So grandparents, aunts, uncles?

Oh we had—my grandfather and grandmother lived in Prague and we used to go and see them every Sunday. Grandmother was blind, more or less um, from the time she had her last child—last son. And uh, I remember being told that uh, mother—who was the oldest of the six children uh, looked after her and brought the youngsters up for her. And uh, I'll never forget the time when my grandparents came to see us—which they did very frequently—came to stay for a few days. And I was only nine, nine years old and I was given this important task of leading my grandmother from our flat upstairs to my mother's office across the yard. And I felt very important. And I held on to her when suddenly she slipped and she fell and she fell on her face and her face started bleeding and I was just so horrified. It's an image which really stayed with me because I felt I didn't let just her down, but I let my parents down for giving me the responsibility. And our grandfather—he was a musician, he was a businessman and um, he had a beard, which tickled me no end whenever he kissed me. Whenever he did that uh, there were always giggles.

Was he religious?

No, none of the family were religious. You know, in Czechoslovakia, after actually, uh, after the First World War it became Czechoslovakia—we had a wonderful president and there was this tremendous patriotism that spread like a wave throughout the country and ninety percent of the population um, were so proud to be Czechs—they were so proud to have a place of their own—that they weren't anymore part of the Austrian empire. And um, and it really, really was a

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happy country. And I grew up knowing I was Jewish, of course, and I was happy to be Jewish, but it didn't matter what you were or who you were. You know, it's uh, it—I mean, in my class, for instance, there was only one person who was Jewish apart from me. And there was no rabbi, or nobody came to give us lessons. So rather than be bored, I went to the lessons—Chri...Christian lessons.

At school.

Yes, this was at school. We still went to the synagogue if we went to Prague to stay with the grandparents and on the ho...on holidays in ??? and—but uh, religion didn't play major roles in our lives until, of course, Hitler was on the scene.

You said your mother had an office. What did she do?

Um, well, my father had a distant relative who manufactured wines and spirits and, and uh, mother ran the office side of it.

And you, you also said there were six children. So you had five aunts and uncles?

Excuse me?

I thought I heard you say that your grandparents had six...

Oh, my grandparents, oh yes uh, yes I had uh, but two of them died of natural causes. And then uh, but I had an aunt—aunt Berta, who was my mother's younger sister and she was a spinster. And uh, she couldn't get over me being such a terrible ragamuffin and always getting into scrapes. And um, then there was a brother of my mother's who was still alive and uh, he had a lovely wife, Marta, and uh, two young boys, who were roughly the same age as, as my sister as I, except that both of them were a year younger than my sister, and I—Hunter

and Tommy. And uh, we used to see them more or less every week. Every time we came to Prague, they—and we were very close family.

So this is from your mother's side.

Yes, and my father also had two sisters, and they had a family. And they were much richer than my uh, mother's uh, mother's uh, relatives. But um, but they were also very nice and uh, we often went on—skiing together, you know, into the mountains and so on.

And they also lived nearby.

They also lived in Prague.

How many people—up—first cousin, aunts, uncles, grandparents—how many people do you think there were in your family?

I would think about sixteen at least, I would...

And how many survived the war?

Three.

Three. You and your sister and...

Well, I'm not counting my sister...

Okay.

Because I was thinking "survive..."

The others, yeah.

...it means uh, going through the Holocaust. We were lucky enough not to...

Well, now that you brought this up um, when you came to England or when you came to the United S...to England...

Yes.

...to live in England. Did you consider yourself a survivor? Did you identify yourself as a survivor?

I was ten years old. I considered myself a little girl who was sent to England to learn English and to stay there 'til the problem blew over and um, you know, and I was uh, told before I left, "You'll be back within a year, you'll see." So, you know...

Then and now?

...survivors, nobody considered themselves survivors then.

No—okay, but do you now?

Not until ten years later. Um, no. Um, I consider myself a child of, you know—it's, it's a difficult question because there is this animosity from the real survivors of the Holocaust...

You mean the camp...

...to us.

...camp survivors.

Yes, to the camps, yes. Um, to um, to us who were just sheltering in England really until the problems blew over. At least that was the uh, that, that was what was supposed...

Of course, you weren't supposed to be here.

Hm?

You weren't supposed to be here, according to the Germans.

You mean, I wasn't supposed to be alive?

Right.

Yeah. There, there would have been no possibility of me surviving had I stayed behind uh, if my parents uh, did not have the moral courage, you know, to let us go. And, I mean, it took an awful lot of—for it be—just tremendous love, and tremendous strength to let us go.

Let's go back to when you were in school.

Yeah, sorry it was ???...

Uh, what did you speak in your household? What kinds of—what was, what was the language of your house?

Oh Czech.

Czech.

Czech, yes. My parents spoke German sometimes if they, if uh, they didn't want me to understand. But I did learn German, you know. It was a sort of a second language to, to learn. Uh, and uh, I didn't know it all that well.

So did you read things in German as well?

No...

Just in, in Czech.

...not really.

Do you think that your parents identified with German culture?

My mother had German schools, my father had Czech commercial, commercial school. I mean, they both spoke a few in German because uh, under the uh, while we were part of the Austrian empire, and that is when they were uh, young people in their teens. And if you wanted to go to university or to a proper college, you know, you, you had to know the language.

Uh, was your father in the First World War?

Yes, he was.

A, a soldier in the Hapsburg Army.

Yes, that's right, he was.

Did it help with the license when he was—after the war, a license to sell liquor and wine.

I don't know how that came about quite honestly, I couldn't tell you, but I don't think he had any help from uh, outside.

And you, you went to school on a regular basis every day.

Oh yes.

A Czech school, and participated in Christian religious education—you went to the, went to the classes. Did you have non-Jewish friends?

Pardon?

Did you have Gentile friends?

Um, well, you know, in our town there were only about three Jewish families, you see. My best friend was a Catholic. Um, I adored my two cousins, the uh, the young boys, you know, who were my uh, mother's uh, brother's chil...children. And they were, of course, Jewish. And I did go to synagogue with them, you know, if we were in Prague. And, as I said, to us uh, it didn't matter so much where we worshiped, you know. We were Czechs first and Jews by race.

So this is Masaryk that you're, you're talking about.

Yes.

He was the hero.

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Masaryk wasn't just a hero, he was a very learned man, he was incredibly fair to one and all, respected throughout the world. We were so proud of him, we used to call him Tatiček Masaryk, which means Father Masaryk. And in every classroom throughout the land there were big portraits of him, you know. And if it was his birthday, you know, there was—it was, it was magical, magical life. We were such a unified community—if only the world could be like that today.

Was there any anti-Semitism that you remember?

Not at that time. I, I don't uh, recall any and my sister was four years my senior, so she was sort of sixteen and a half by the time, you know, we went to England. Oh no, she was just under sixteen, because it was up to...

Right.

...sixteen that we could take. And I asked her, because she would have known. And uh, and she said she never encountered it.

Hm. Well, it was Masaryk.

It was Masaryk. And even after he, he died, his, sort of, pupil, Eduard Benes...

Benes.

...took over. And, I mean, he wasn't Masaryk. You know, nobody could have uh, equaled um, equaled his popularity. But uh, but he was a good man.

Benes.

Yes, he was a good man and uh, uh, he was respected.

Um, what, what kinds of memories, sort of, stand out up to 1938? I mean, you said you had a—no clouds on your horizon.

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No. We had a horse, and a horse and, and we had a cart with the horse and, and sometimes barrels of the uh, of wine or the beer, whatever, you know, was distributed by the horse, and on special occasions I was allowed to ride on him to the river. But I mustn't—I wasn't allowed to go very far where it was deep—after that he could have a real good brush down. And, you know, it's amazing, I still can sort of feel his, um, his coat tickling my thighs as it got wet and um, feeding him every day with uh, well, with whate...with sugar lumps, really, which my parents didn't think was right for him. But my passion were cats. And every time I saw a cat I decided it must be a stray—that it looked hungry, and I used to take it home and put it up in the loft—so I climbed the ladder to the uh, to the roof uh, of one of our buildings uh, where there was a sort of uh, uh, well, there was space where we, where we kept uh, hay for our horse. And I used to keep the cat—stray cats there and feed them. And whenever anyone lost a cat, they came first to us. “Has Vera got my cat?” And, of course, we had cats too. And, you know, when it was time for me to leave, one of the things that I remember most was um, that my cat was expecting ki...and my father threatened to drown them because, because it kept happening, you see.

[interruption in interview]

I...

How many cats did you have altogether?

Well, we only had one, one, one cat. And the others, as I said, didn't really belong to me. But just before I left for England, that cat got pregnant and my father had threatened, you know, that he drowned the kit...uh, kittens. And this

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was after the Germans occupied us. And uh, my best friend, Marta—who was very loyal to me—she promised she wouldn't let my father drown the kittens. And I've got a lovely picture of her with the kittens in, in my book, you know, to prove to me that they were still alive. It was rather sad and happy ending, because after the war, the first time I went to my own town—back to my hometown—and of course, my mother and father weren't there. None of the few Jewish people that were there had survived. And I went rather heavy-hearted, as you can imagine, to a sort of a pub restaurant next door where we used to go sometimes for Sunday lunch. And as I sat there, the owner, who wa...used to be a young lad and now he was a man, came to me and he sat a cat in my life—lap. And he said, “This is the daughter of your cat. Do you want to keep it?” And, you know, I cried and I cried and I cried because I realized she was the only one—only survivor of that happy time of my childhood in Czech...and the other thing, which I think was most important of that time—the summer before the Germans invaded, I was nine and a half, and mother sent me to a holiday camp. She thought it might do me good to sort of um, be away on my own without my sister, you know, and without them.

This is how your book opens.

Hm?

This is how your book opens.

Yes. And um, we had a—I, I went to this camp by a lovely river—the most beautiful countryside and there were lake, kids all around me and we were tobogganing uh, not tobogganing—we were canoeing and um, and um, hiking and digging mushrooms and doing so many lovely things. And uh, then suddenly I

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injured my big toe of my right foot and it turned infected. And um, suddenly instead of enjoying myself, it was all bandaged up and I was confined to a wheelchair and there was me sitting watching everyone else enjoying themselves. And I was so miserable and I cried and the counselor who came to me and she said to me, “Why are you crying, little girl?” And I said, “Well, look, look at my foot. What should I do, laugh?” And she said, “What is your name?” And I said, “Vera Diamant,” which in Czech, of course, was “Věruška Diamantova.” And so she looked at me and she said, “Ah, you are a diamond. You must be crying real pearls.” And, you know, it made me feel important and grown up. I mean, I knew I wasn’t crying pearls, but I thought it was rather lovely thing to say, and I thought “I’m not going to be a misery, and I’m not going to write to my mum and ask her to come and fetch me, I’m going to stick it out.”

Even though you, you said you were homesick.

Well, I was homesick because uh, because I couldn’t do anything, you know, and um, and when a kid is in pain, he or she wants his mummy, you know. Anyway, when mum—when my mother came to fetch me at the end of the month, she exclaimed in horror at the very sight of me. And she said—when I showed her my poor old toe, she said, “It must hurt ever so much. Didn’t you cry?” And I said, “Of course I didn’t, I only shed pearls.” And this made her think “That little girl of mine isn’t tied to my skirts anymore. She can be brave, she can be independent.” And I know for certain that if it hadn’t been for that experience, eight months later she wouldn’t have let me come to England, and I wouldn’t be sitting here today talking. So it was a very, very important incident and it gave the

right title to my autobiography, because the pearls of childhood—or pearls of childhood tie into my childhood tears.

It's a beautiful story.

Thank you.

Uh, was there any discussion—was your, was your father politically aware of what was going on?

I think mother was more aware of what was going on than father because my father was an incredible optimist, because, I mean, there was an occasion on the day uh, 15th of March 1939, when the Germans invaded and um, a sort of a large group of soldiers came across from town. And I'll never forget them arriving because I woke up and I saw my mother and father standing in the window and my sister next to them, and they had their arms around each other. I kept to their side and couldn't believe my eyes, because line upon line of German soldiers were marching into our square and, and there were an awful lot of the inhabitants of our small town lining the street. And then suddenly a...with one voice they started singing the Czech national anthem. It started with the words, "Where is my home?" And I didn't realize then that our home was no longer ours anymore and...

It's ???

Hm?

???

No not, not—Kde Domov Muj—yes because it starts with the words "Kde domov muj," "where is my home?" But that is our national anthem.

Do you remember how you felt watching the Germans march in?

I felt shocked rather than afraid. I had no idea what was coming. In fact, I even had a sort of a sneaking pleasure from being told that the kids from Transylvania will take over my school and I'll have an unexpected holiday. But, you know, at the age of ten and a half, or, you know, uh, there was no television—nothing like that to tell me and our parents tried to protect us. Yeah, and my father kept—he was an optimist, you know. He, he thought uh, “What would the Germans want with Czech Jews?”

Well, when they took the Sudetenland, do you remember if people were upset about that at first?

Uh, my parents had been to the Sudetenland and they were obviously very, very shocked. I, as a little girl, also tasted what it meant to some other people, because um, during the night, as the Germans were marching into the Sudetenland, many people, I mean, whether they were Jewish or Christian, or whether they were political refugees, rightists or uh, well, enemies of the Third Reich in anyway, um, they fled into the outskirts of Prague for shelter and one family and stopped in our town, and I found the next morning a girl in our class who wasn't there before. And I noticed though she was dressed she had no shoes on her feet. And, you know, I asked her ??? She said, “Well, my father ??? into town there was no time to take anything.” And I noticed that her feet were the same size of—as mine, and uh, my home was just across the road from the school, so at play time I ran over and I just took a pair of shoes out of my wardrobe and then gave it to her. She was so pleased. When I was back from—back home in the afternoon, I thought my

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mother would be very cross with me. And instead of that she hugged me and there were tears in her eyes, and she said, “Bring Anna back home tomorrow after school and let’s see what else we can pick out for her.” So that was a little taste, you know, that the world isn’t such a safe place after all. And the other one was, of course uh, when the Germans marched in and um, the commandant of the troops of our town uh, took over the best room in our house for his office. And it was the room which had a separate entrance, and father used it for business entertaining and we used it for special occasions, you know, special family celebrations and get togethers. And the commandant summoned our whole family uh, before him. And I remember standing there, looking at him, and he was sitting like you are, by the table, and he had these shiny, polished boots—leather boots ????. And mother was very good seamstress and she, she had made a couple of lovely rugs and there were his heels sticking into mother’s mat, you know. And I found the whole thing terribly offensive. I hated it—hated him ????. And he said to my father, “I hear that you and your family can speak German.” And father said, “That’s true.” And the commandant said, “Well from now on...”

[interruption in interview]

Anyway, he said to my—this um, commandant said to my father, “If your family can speak German I want only German spoken in this house.” And father looked at the commandant straight in the eye and he said, “I am the head of this household, and as long as I live, we shall speak Czech, and German only in your presence.” At that the commandant stood up and he spat in my father’s face. And,

you know, I can see ??? I can see the saliva running down his cheek. And I vowed I'd never again speak a word of German again.

You haven't.

I haven't. I, I could not. I think when something like that happens to you as a child, it's imprinted in your memory and you sort of feel almost obliged, you know?

Were there Zionists in your town?

No. No, I, um, there was a Jewish doctor and a Jewish vet...veterinarian surgeon, right. Both great admirers of my mother, who was really and truly beautiful, but very, very much in love with father so they didn't do something about. Um, I don't remember anybody, you know, who was uh, sort of deeply religious.

But even, even in the political aspect of Zionism, nobody ever talked about going to Palestine.

No...

Certainly not...

...not as far as I know.

...not in your house.

Okay, yes. I mean, quite possibly behind closed doors when there was a, a whole group of them, uh, the subject may have been discussed. Uh, but before Hitler, and be...before there was the danger of Hitler, everybody was much too happy to be in uh, Czechoslovakia than to want to go to Palestine. You know, afterwards, obvi...I'm sure things had changed. But, you must please remember that our parents tried to shield us from fear.

So had you heard the name Hitler or Nazi?

Oh, of course, yes, we knew all about Hitler. Uh, and we knew that uh, he was— there was a threat of Hitler. But they hoped, of course, that um, the invasion wouldn't happen. It wasn't 'til after uh, Chamberlain broke his promise to Czechoslovakia, that uh, the situation changed rapidly and the fear then was absolutely uh, uh, well, I mean, there was a lot of fear then. Though some, some people I know when my mother found out that there was an Englishman who had been in Prague and in uh, November—December of 1938 and that he was trying to get out as many of refugees who had fled to Prague from the Sudetenland— child refugees and also Jewish children from—who were refugees in, in, in Czechoslovakia. And that was the source of her, as I said, knowledge. That uh, something unpleasant might be happening. It's like next door there was a Jewish family and they had two boys. One was the same age as myself and my sister and uh, the wife called mother a wicked step-mother for even considering to send the—her children away. I mean, lots of people—look, nobody knew what Hitler had in store for them. Nobody knew that. So lots a people were short-sighted.

It'll be over in a year.

That's right. Well, listen, I think any parent faced with such a situation who has the strength and courage to send their beloved child to a country they—that they themselves had never been to, to people they'd never even heard of, without knowing when or even if they would ever see them again, what an incredible undertaking. It required an awful lot of courage and a very special kind of love to be able to do that.

And when did your mother start to talk about this possibility?

Well, I mentioned that we had two cousins in Prague and it was their mother and father who had heard about Nicky Winton. Though they didn't know the name, but they knew that there was now uh, an organization which was been set up by this English man who was finding homes ??? and the people to try and save as many as possible. And she told my mother about him. So that's how my mother knew. And then she decided after the episode uh, with this German commandant in our house. Uh, father dismissed it, saying, "We just were unlucky to have such a bastard in our house." They only stayed about a month, you know, and then they went further to even small um, number of uh, German soldiers to keep order in our town. And so my father dismissed it, as I said. But mother didn't. Mother feared for our lives. She wasn't quick enough to ????. So she went to Prague and stayed with my grandparents and without telling father, she uh, queued up day after day, night after night for about four days 'til she was able to ??? and our photographs and you know, couple of my books with a photograph of me as a very, sort of, dainty little, little girl, which captured the eyes of the family, I think. Because they didn't realize they were getting a real ragamuffin. So uh, um, she didn't say anything to father or to us. And then one day we were sitting—we were having supper and sitting around the table and mother was making tea and she suddenly put her knife and fork down and looked at father and she said, "I heard today that Eva and Vera can go." I'll never forget the look on father's face. Covered it in his hands. There was a deathly sigh and then he looked up at us and there were tears in his eye. He said, "Very well, we have to let them hide."

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Amazing how these things are still so much in my head and my heart, you know, that as if it was yesterday. And, of course, they saved our lives. And, you know, later on—much later on when I found out that my parents did not survive and my aunt—my mother's sister—she buried my mother in Belsen, two days after the end of the war. And those two young cousins from Prague—they went from camp to camp and as skeletons—they ended in Belsen. And auntie and my mother—before she caught typhus—saw them because they were standing by the fence or whatever which divided uh, the barbed wire, which divided the male camp from the female. And they were shouting “Kessner! Kessner! Kessner!” which was my mother's uh, maiden name and my auntie's name because she didn't—hadn't married. They didn't recognize the boys, they were just skeletons. And auntie—my Auntie Berta—she buried all three in Belsen all after the end of the war. And the youngest on his sixteenth birthday. Um, they were supposed to come—homes had been found for them, and they were due to come on that last transport, that fated trans...it was due to leave on 1st of September, the day uh, Hitler invaded Poland and all borders were closed.

Mm.

Um, when I was writing the book on Nicky Winton, I did my best to research how many of those two hundred and fifty children had survived.

How many did you find?

Two. And those children were taken before, um, before the rest of them went to the camps to Palestine because their parents found enough money to give to the

Germans to get their permission for them to leave. So all in all, none of them survived. Because the others, you know, weren't, weren't involved.

This is the seventh transport, seventh...

Uh, the eighth.

Eighth.

The eighth transport. And—no, the ninth! Sorry the ninth. There were nine transports. There should have been nine. And um, I, I, sort of—it's, it's very, very difficult to comprehend. All of these things didn't come out until I met Nicky Winton again because I never knew who saved our lives until 1988. But neither did anybody else. Like my foster family—perhaps I should go now to these foster...

Sure.

Um, before I left home, my mother and father—they kept reassuring us, “You’ll be back within a year, you’ll see.” And my m...mother—she had clothes made for both my sister and I—lovely clothes so that we would come to England in style. And they were all made to fit because she couldn't bear the thought of us not coming back soon. Just before we were leaving, on that last night, my father gave me a leather bound diary and it was full of empty pages. And he said to me, “Use it as a diary.” And I said “But, there are, there are no dates in it.” And he said, “Well, there’ll be times when you have nothing to write about and other times when there’ll be lot you’ll want to share with us. Maybe you’ll be homesick or maybe you’ll be naughty or something wonderful’s happened. When you’ve got something to say you’d like us to hear, put it down in the diary, so that when you

come back to us we can all sit round the table and read the diary together.” And mother on that last night she put her arms around me and looked through an open window and the night sky was full of stars. And she said, “Let the stars of the night and the sun of the day be the messengers of our love and our thoughts, and in that way we’ll always remember...” I can’t tell you what thoughts with it they weigh. Because once war started and all correspondence ceased, I was able to talk to them through the sun and the stars. I—and I wrote and wrote to my—in my dairy. I covered fourteen or fifteen thick exercise books throughout the war. They were my thoughts, my hopes, my fears.

Did Eva write too?

And Eva did the same, yes. And, you know, we went together. She was on the other side of England—we saw each other on holiday. She was in a posh school. I was in a very poor family but with a very good heart—a Christian family. But again, they made me feel at home. They accepted that I was Jewish. They didn’t force me to go to church. But they said it would be nice if I went. And I thought, “Well, there’s only one God. Where... wherever I am I will pray for my fam...my dear parents as I did every night.” And uh, I—it um, and really it was my parents who gave me this wonderful gift of all the records of those years, which were now on paper. And the diaries—they were meant for them, for them alone. And I felt—after I found out that father was shot on a death—in a—on a death march in December 1944, you know, that my mother had perished of typhus and all the rest of it and about the rest of the family. I put all the diaries in a box and I felt I could never bear to open them again because they were meant for my parents and my

parents alone. And it wasn't 'til uh, after I came back to England—because I went back to Prague at the end of the war, and I was there for three and a half years, and I studied at uh, Prague University. I took English and literature. Then I was offered a job to be a head of a, a translating pool at the Ministry of Defense and it seemed too good to miss, so I thought, “Okay, I'll take it and I'll do my studying sort of uh, in my spare time.” You know, I didn't think I'd, I'd have any problem, but...

This is still in Prague?

Yes, it was still in Prague, but six months after that uh, there was the Communist coup. And, of course, I was pro-British, anti-communist, Jewish...

And Jewish.

...and a bourgeois uh, bourgeois. All the things, you know, all the things that uh, the Communists hated and I found myself being interrogated because I could never keep my mouth shut. And I nearly ended up in uh, in the salt mines...

[interruption in interview]

...and, and uh, I'm saying that in all seriousness. Luckily for me they found that I wasn't the culprit, and they found—and he was actually my uh, senior—a young officer from the British uh, Air Force and that he was a Czech—that he was in the uh, I mean, the Czech uh, pilots were part of uh, the British...

The RAF.

...uh, British, yes, RAF. And um, he kept telling me that I've got to be careful and I must keep my mouth shut and, you know. I—okay. So I won't join the party. That will get me into trouble, he kept saying, you know. And it was he who

was giving the ??? away and he was hanged. So I had a very narrow escape and then I managed, you know, to get to England.

Was that tough? Was that difficult to do—to get back to England?

Oh very, it took years for me to bribe the authorities to get me a passport, you know, to—because my passport obviously wasn't recognized anymore. I actually managed it because I—because they realized they were accusing me unjustly.

And I said, "Look, I don't, I don't want to have anything to do with pol... I don't care if you're, if you're Communist or if you Democrat, ??? or whatever. I want to go back to England to my sister. I've lost my family here, I've got my only sister in England, please let me go. That's all I want. Let me leave my job."

Because the first thing is you had to have uh, to be able to get out of the country uh, was permission of your, uh, from your boss. And the Minister of Defense couldn't give me that permission, really, because uh, of the political uh, sort of tie-up. And, because, I mean, I could have um, given a lot of secrets to the other side. But uh, in the end I managed to um, go.

Just, back to the—before the, the uh, your escape. Did—do you remember that the Germans had passed anti-Jewish laws when they came into Czechoslovakia, I mean, could you still go to school? Could...

I was under the Germans less than three months, or about—because, because they came in March and I left on the 1st of July—three days before my eleventh bir...so, of course, there was nothing yet, at that time. And, in fact, the first time I was really aware of what was happening, though we heard ru...rumors, uh, let me just go back a little. I was with this very caring, but very poor Christian family

and I called my foster-mother Mummy Rainford and, and Daddy Rainford was her husband, and they had a daughter Dorothy. I'll uh, never forget what happened when Mummy Rainford came to claim me at London. I was waiting for her in a big hall. There wasn't anyone left there. All the other children—all the other two hundred and thirty-nine children had been—including my sister—had gone uh, to their respective uh, guardians. And I was left there all alone and I, I was really scared to bits. And then this door opened, and there stood a little lady—hardly taller than myself and she had these big glasses and a hat with ??? on her head. And as she saw me she started laughing and smiling and crying at the same time and she ran towards me, flung her arms around me and she spoke some words I didn't understand then, but they were, "You shall be loved." And loved I was. And, you know, those are the most important words any child in danger, any child in need can hear.

And she was married.

Hm?

She was married?

They were married and she had a daughter who was three years my ???. And that's another thing, which...

[interruption in interview]

So my English mummy, Mummy Rainford, as I was asked to call her, was the first female lay preacher in, in Lancashire. But she didn't just preach religion, she lived it everyday of her life. And she sort of made me realize that it doesn't matter

where you worship, as long as you believe in God and as long as you do what you can.

Do you think her religion motivated her to take, take you in?

I am sure that it was—motivation came from the whole family because they discussed it as a family. As I said, they weren't affluent and it meant sacrifices from them and from their daughter. And when they asked her daughter, would she mind having a sister—younger sister come to live with them and that it would mean she'd have to share her pocket money and that way they'll only have one short holiday a year—she said, “No, I don't mind, let her come. But please, can I give up my music lessons?”

Do you remember what she said about her husband—what he said about—her husband said...

Yes, that's what I was just going to say, yes.

Okay, okay.

And when years later, I asked Daddy Rainford—the man of the family—why did he do it? Why did he choose me? And he said, “I knew I couldn't save the world, I knew I couldn't stop war from coming, but I knew I could save one human life. And as Hitler broke his—as Chamberlain broke his pledge to Czechoslovakia and Jews were in the direst danger, I decided it must be a Czech Jewish child.” And Dorothy, their daughter, chose me from uh, about six photographs of, of children because she liked my smile. So I was very, very lucky. That uh, sentiment from Daddy Rainford has done the rounds of so many talks and so many uh, films,

because it uh, it's really such a powerful statement and such a worthwhile sentiment, it's amazing.

It's, it's like Nicholas Winton, actually.

Yes, yes. I never thought of it before.

Is it—you're an eleven year child...

Mm-hm.

...and you see this woman. You're all alone in this large place. Do you remember what you felt when, when she came in?

Well, I was shaking at the knees, I tell you, you know, who would come and claim me? And I didn't know any English. All I knew is, was uh, "I have sister. Eva." Uh, "I have hunger." And the third one was, "I need toilet." And uh, you know, I, I mean it was very scary. We went on a train to Liverpool. She left me in the compartment and ran off. And I didn't even know where I was going or what was her name, you know. But any rate—and then she sort of suddenly appeared back with—holding a large coronet of uh, ice cream triumphantly in her hand, you know, for me to have. Now uh, I was, I was very lucky with my family. They didn't try to make a Christian out of me. But they didn't also—they, they weren't—they didn't have any Jewish friends. They didn't think it was significant. They felt the most significant thing was to make me happy, to make me one of them, to show me how fond they are of me. And at the same time never try trespassing sort of almost pretending they're my parents. They, they didn't want to take the place of my parents. They want me—after the war to hand me

over to my parents as their child, which, of course, didn't happen to lots of the children whose uh, guardians weren't as thoughtful as the Rainfords.

Where did they live?

They lived in Bootle, which is a rather slummy part of Liverpool. But then, then uh, when war started and uh, and I was actually evacuated to yet another family, and together with their daughter Dorothy. Uh, then later on they uh, rented a house um, sort of halfway between Liverpool and Preston so that we could all be together again. But when uh, after Dunkirk, when the British troops had to flee back to England and there were many Czech and Slovak troops who were fighting um, in France at the side of the British—fighting the Germans, and they also fled to England. They were actually headed by our second president, President Benes...

Benes.

...who was now president-in-exile, who managed to get out with uh, uh, several of his uh, of the members of the government and he set up a proper sort of a government corps uh, here in Britain after Dunkirk.

If I'm remembering—Benes wanted to fight the Germans when they came in.

Oh yes. Benes was very, all for it. He, um, because we had the best fortifications in, in the whole of Europe. And, I mean—where Sudetenland was. And uh, it was tremendous fortification against the uh, Germans. And then we had to open them, you know, let them have it. And um, that's when all the refugees poured into Prague. But it wasn't that, that uh, Benes let them have it. Uh...

It was the British...

...he was forced—yes—by Britain that he has to cede the Sudetenland to preserve world peace. But, of course, he didn't preserve world peace but he did buy England and France a bit of time.

Time. Peace in our time.

That's right, as you say. Waving that little white piece of paper, you know. Mm, didn't last very long, did it?

How long were you in communication with your, with your family when you were in England. Did you...

My parents?

Did you correspond with them at all?

Oh, my parents and I and my sister, we were writing nearly everyday. But once war started, there was no real news. We did have one or two little notes sent by Switzerland—some friends in Switzerland, and then it all ceased. And, and that's when I was—I felt so fortunate at having the sun and the stars and my diary, through which I remained close to them forever.

Did you have any idea when the war started what was, what was coming?

No uh, we, I was an optimistic little girl and, and uh, and there weren't real any news about the camps for several years. And it was until March 1943—and by then I was in a Czechoslovak school. There was a—after Dunkirk there was a Czechoslovak school set up because quite a lot of families fled from Prague to France and then, you know, to England with Benes's uh, sort of army. And um, um, it was rather, rather strange and pretty crummy actually. I mean, I loved writing even then and when I heard that President Benes was in England, you

know, I was beside myself and I wrote to him—it was nearly Christmas—and I wrote to him sort of showing my faith in him—that soon he would lead us back into our beloved homeland, you know, and signed it, and anyway—and I got a little visiting card from him, you know, an acknowledgement.

He responded.

Yes, he responded. I was thirteen, not quite thirteen then. And uh, then I heard—because I was terribly homesick for Czech music—anything that was Czech. Czech bread, I missed Czech bread. I hated English bread, it was just like a sponge. And, and uh, anyway, when I heard that there were going to be the Czech soldiers and air men singing and dancing in the main theater in Liverpool, I begged my foster father to let me go and see them. And he said, “Oh no,” because by then there were ??? you know, dropping and I said, “Listen, if the Czech president isn’t afraid oh, surely you’re not going to be afraid of let me go.” So anyway, he came with me. And I took this little visiting card uh, with me and during the interval I marched up to the box where they were sitting with the, the mayor of Liverpool and there were two Czech soldiers outside, you know, standing sort of with their guns looking very serious. And I said uh, I gave them the visiting card and said, “Will you please tell the president that Vera Diamant wishes to speak to him.” And, of course, they look at me, you know. They went in and, you know, he remembered my letter and he asked me to sit with them for the rest of the performance and said, “This young lady,” he said to his wife, “she wrote me such a lovely letter, you know.” And he started quizzing me—was I happy, was I looked after, what I missed most. And I said, “Well, of course, my

parents...” And, and then he said, “Was there—is there anything else?” And he said, um, um, and I said, “Yes, I miss not being in a Czech school or not learning—carrying on learning Czech. And, and, he said, “But, you know, there is a Czech school for children like you are, and it’s a bilingual school and we founded it on the, after Dunkirk. And, um...”

Where was the school?

The school was then in Shropshire, and in uh, in a place called Whitchurch. It was a little town in Shropshire and they gave us a sort of a old house, which was sort of falling to bits. But uh, it was wonderful. He got me there within a week, and I was only—I still had my foster family to go to on holidays and—but I was taken out of their responsibility except for the holidays, and I was more or less like a warden, almost, of the school. But there were so many of us, like Uta, you know, she was there at the same time as I. And, and the friendships we forged there have lasted to this day. Because most of us there had lost our parents and we were each other’s family. And it’s, it’s, it’s been, again, a wonderful gift. You know, that—because we all shared the same fate—we all, all lost our parents.

You were all Jews at that school?

Oh yes, oh yes. There were quite a few, quite a few, you know, I would think about probably forty percent. Because there were also members, of course—children of the government and the soldiers and the air men’s children, you know. And people like Bata Works—which was a shoe factory, uh, which I—factories also in Czech...Moravian uh, but it had its shoe factory also in England, and so

about six children came from there. But apart from my parents being so very much missed, they were the happiest years, you know, I had for a long time.

So what year did, did this—did you go there? Nineteen forty, after Dunkirk?

Um, yes, um, I—it wasn't 1940, it was founded, I think—about 1941, somewhere around there. And um, um, and it was first in Whitchurch and then it moved to this uh, central Wales and we were given a hotel, and even a bit of the river. And the lake, you know, it belonged to the hotel, so we were in seventh heaven. And we still have our reunions there to this day.

And how long 'til the end of the war?

We were there 'til the end of the war, and I was the first one to hear when the war ended that my mother had survived. I have it in writing from her that she survived, and “Please let the children—we are well and going back home,” and was signed by her Christian name Erma and her sister's name Berta. By the time I got the note she was already dead but, of course, I thought she was alive. And that was the worst thing that could have happened. That all the years of the war I was preparing myself for the possibility of not seeing her again. And then she was given to me. I was the first person of the school to hear and everybody was so happy for me—so pleased. And I thanked God everyday, because it was the only thing I wanted in life: to see her again, to look after her. I mean, I was sixteen. I wanted to work for her—I wanted, you know, and then I enlisted in the first transport the school was, was organ...organizing to transport us—to repatriate us back those of us who were orphaned. And, and uh, you know, a couple of days before I left...

You got the word.

But you see all that is in my diary. And that's part of it. I think, I ga...gave you, sort of, some leaflets, didn't I?

Mm-hm.

And there's one where, where a girl speaks—I mean, you wouldn't have time to look at them—but from a certain school I was speaker before I even met Nicky Winton. And then that absolutely shakes the youngsters, because it's got the heart in it—it's got—it's not written by an old woman looking back at her childhood. And they, they actually—my mother left the most wonderful letter to say goodbye the day before she was taken into the camps.

She went to Auschwitz?

She went first to Theresienstadt...

Uh-huh.

...then she went to Auschwitz. Uh, then she went to Hamburg. They had to work, you know, when—during the air raids um, to see the German guards—they used to take bets how many will be killed by, by British bombers, you know. And then she ended up in Belsen.

And she died of typhus.

And so did my cousin, Berta. But you see, the letter she sent—I mean, the, the news that she had succumbed to typhus, that letter wa...the news was given to my sister. And she wrote me the most wonderful letter, which is in its entirety in the book.

In the book.

Vera Gissing Interview

And she broke it to me so gently, you know? And uh, e...even, somebody—even thought that father had survived, you know, and then we hear that he was shot on a death march. And again, just really—just months be...af...three and a half years—with him it was four and a half years of terrible suffering because he was uh, taken first to the little fortress in Theresienstadt, which was the most renowned—the most awful prison for political, as well as Jewish dissidents. And uh, mother managed to bribe somehow the German guards there and a month later to let him go to a normal—to the normal Terezin ghetto. And she didn't know she was successful. But when she got to camp—to the camp, you know, there was father. And during that month he went from his jet black hair—he was only in his forties then, uh, he went completely white. All his fingernails had gone. Two fingers had gone as well—they were taken away with the, you know, under torture. And he never really recovered. You know, he went from camp to camp, but so—you know, their lives were prolonged, but with a lot of suffering. And it was very, very hard for me to come to the fact that God gave me mother back and then took her...

As long as you brought up it up, what is your religious—if any—your religious feeling?

I'm proud to be a Jew. I would never deny I was Jewish. But I had mixed feelings and often asked myself for years, "Who am I? What am I?" And then in 1968, when Dubček was in, in power and Czechoslovakia was joyous and happy, I was sent by the BBC to do a program on what the Czech woman was expecting from the freer, brighter future. And I was there—for the first time I was there from

1949, which was when I, you know, ran away for the second time to England. And I was absolutely overwhelmed how patriotic I felt, how at one with the people I felt. I felt even more uh, emotional when my two dau...because my two daughters were with me. One was six years old, the other was uh, ten years old. And it was while I was there on this task I mentioned that the Russian tanks rolled in, and the Prague Spring was over. I'll never forget riding in a friend's car through Wenceslas Square, and there were Russian tanks some of them burnt out and people lining the streets, looking like they did look when I saw the Germans marched in, because their country again was no longer ours. It was the most dreadful feeling. And then suddenly my eleven year old daughter put her arms around me, she said, "Mummy, now I know—now I feel how you must have felt when you were my age and saw the Germans march." And it was such a moment—such an important moment because then there was a tremendous bond from that day.

That's very perceptive.

Yes, and uh, it was uh, instead of, instead of uh, broadcasting what the Czech woman was expecting from the brighter future, I uh, had the task of telling them what the nation had to put up with now.

So you had told your daughter about your experience.

A little bit, a little bit, not—I didn't, I didn't, sort of, want to burden them in any way. But I think, I think it was then that the seeds of indecision—but, sort of, writing my book came into my mind. This was strengthened in 1985, when the um, in 1985 it was forty years from the end of the war. And I uh, managed to

Vera Gissing Interview

arrange a reunion of the Czech school in the hotel which used to be our home. And my uh, job was to—was publicity so that we could find as many children in various countries—of course, we're all grown up—as possible. And uh, I, sort of, contacted many uh, of the, well the newspapers uh, the—and, and I, I, I put some articles also in—queries in America—well, everywhere. Because we were scattered—we had scattered. And um, anyway, on that first reunion, I think, I found about fifty children all together. And uh, dif...one of things I did, I was asked by the Woman's Hour which—because by then I was with them and I was on a very good uh, we had a good relationship from the time I was in Prague. Incidentally that uh, I gave the talk as an unknown woman, because I wouldn't—didn't dare give my name in case I got some of my friends in Czecho into trouble. And it was uh, voted the best program of the year with uh, Dame Sybil Thorndike and uh, what's his name, Chevalier, Maurice Chevalier. And all ??? Czech refugee and it was broadcasted into every, every country. And it was at that time that I was interviewed for, for this—for that program and also when they, they—the Woman's Hour decided to do a, sort of, a feature on it as well. I was interviewed by the Welsh BBC and they said, when I sort of got—when I uh, answered their questions as I've been an...answering you, they uh, they asked me—they said to me, “Vera what did you do the day war broke uh, the war—there was the end of the war. What did you do? Did you celebrate?” And I said, “Oh yes, we celebrated,” and I said, “but you know, I can't exactly remember, but because this is such a special occasion, you being here, I'll tell you exactly.” And I went upstairs and I opened the box, which held my diaries, which I hadn't

opened for forty years. And I took it down, I found the relevant date and I translated it exactly, and they were sitting there and tears were streaming down their face, and said, “Vera, we studied the Holocaust but this is something completely different—from you we’ve learned the feel of it. You’ve got to have those diaries translated, you know, you’ve got to. It’s a—it’s—it, it—you, you promise? Promise you would.” And I said, “No I won’t promise.” They looked at me shocked. I said, “I am a literary translator, you know.” So they said, “What you waiting for?” And I said—but I explained it would be very hard for me to go back for them and really—because, because of what happened with my parents. But you know, it was very ther...therapeutic once I started writing. I used to write through the night in my study overlooking open fields, the moon above, and I felt absolutely close to them, and that’s how I wrote the book.

It must have been very emotional to go back over...

It was incredibly emotional, but, you know, when we had the reunion—it was only a week later after that they left—we had the reunion, I realized that in the book I didn’t have just my story, I had their stories too—the rest of them. The whole community of people who were like family and that I owed it to them too and to the kindness of the British people who took us in.

In 1985 you didn’t, you didn’t know about Nicky Winton.

No, I didn’t know about Nicky Winton at all. He, uh, I um, it took me about two and a half years to finish the, you know, two years to finish the book. And then, of course, I was looking for a publisher—a good publisher. And I found a very good Jewish publisher called Robson Books. And uh, anyway—but obviously I did a

lot of interviewing as well—updating the people I knew, you know, so that I could draw them into the story. And uh, nobody knew who, who masterminded our rescue. And uh, I was then with my partner, Harry, who was a Jewish uh, colleague of mine from the school—we were in the same class for three years. So we were very close. Our class was just like a family.

What was his last name?

Steinhower. And he managed to get—his—my, his parents and sister managed to come here after him, you know, so. And he—we knew each other from the Czech school and uh, both our marriages had broken down. He married a shikseh and I married out as well, and so it was rather nice, you know, to be together. And uh, and anyway, that's it—he's died now. But we decided to hold that reunion and uh, it, it went down—it just went down so well. And uh, he was um, friendly with Esther Anderson, because you saw the film...

Mm-hm.

...didn't you? And you know where, where we embrace—when Nicky and I embrace and that was Esther Anderson's program. As it happens, Harry looked after Esther Anderson's teeth as a dentist and her husband was a writer as well, Desmond Wilcox, and he was Jewish, she wasn't. She went into the freight, but she wasn't Jewish—oh well I think we got—some message we had will come through. And uh, and uh, anyway uh, I don't know what I was going to say.

Desmond Wilcox.

Yeah, I know I was talking about Desmond, but they sort of, um...

Did he read the manuscript?

Yes, he wanted to read the manuscript and he took it home and he said, “Not only did I enjoy the story, it’ll make a beautiful book—but it’ll also make a wonderful film and I know just the man.” And, you know, the film was on its way of being made and, in fact, they worked on it for two years and put nearly a million po...uh, pounds in it, but then there was a recession in the film business.

But you wrote—you pretty much wrote the screenplay for them, didn’t you?

For M...Matej?

Yes.

Oh yes. It wasn’t just the screenplay. I uh, right from the word “go” Matej saw my book in Czech in the Jewish Museum or li...in the Jew li...library, because its come out in many languages. It’s coming out next month in Japanese.

Oh.

Yeah, even Japanese. Anyway so uh, uh, when he found the book he was absolutely over the moon and he put—used part of it uh, for uh, all my loved ones into the film. I don’t know if you’ve seen it, but if you saw the first film on—of a Czech Jewish pre-war and how the ??? turned great and how suddenly he had—he, he could use Nicky Winton with his permission and through me and, and he could use the scene to save the youngest child of that family, you know, came to England. And as I said, it was fictitious but lovely, lovely film. You should ask them to show it to you, really. And he used the—of the uh, passages and uh, the diary and, and various things—with my permission again in this, in this film.

That’s how it started. And, of course, when he heard that apart from *Pearls of Childhood* I had spent three years researching and putting together the story of the

transports and, and interviewing masses of kids and, and you know, I'm doing—I just wanted to say thank you to Nicky, and I couldn't think of a better way than doing, doing that. And I spent about a—I spent a whole week—I was supposedly in Prague on holiday, and he came with his laptop every morning about six o'clock, you know. And he was so enthusiastic that I was very glad to sacrifice my holiday to tell him everything, and then I helped with everything. I gave him all the contacts, I gave him even, you know, the uh, photograph—not the sh...not photograph—the shot where Nicky in his young days is holding the child...

Holding the child.

...and the people are waving. I mean, I knew where he could get it in America because I was—I had happened to meet a lady who made a little film and was a—and used that, you know. So it, it was just great. And, and what I appreciated was that he's not—he's young, and he's act...he felt in his heart it's a story that's got to be told on film, as well as in book. And that he was willing to uh, risk his shirt, you know, to do it.

[interruption in interview]

Let me take you back just for a second. I'm going to...

Yeah. It's all right, that's fine.

...ask the same question. When you were sitting at a dinner table with your family before you got on the, on the train, and your mother said the next day you were going to leave...

Well, not, not the next day, it was the next month.

The next—okay. But she had basically announced...

Yeah.

... that you were leaving...

That we could leave, because fa...she was waiting for father's reaction.

...what was your reaction?

I was flabbergasted, and at the same time little bit afraid and a little bit excited, because as far as I knew no one from our town had been, ever, ever been in England.

So this was an adventure.

Yes, and, and my parents sort of tried to make me think of it as an adventure—as, as an opportunity to learn another language uh, see other people. Uh, I think, and I'm pretty sure that they tried to persuade themselves that we will be back. I think it they admitted to themselves that there's a big possibility we would never see each other again they wouldn't do it. I don't know, I, I—but it would have been much, much harder.

And the, the night before you left, was that still the same kind of ambi...ambivalent feelings about going?

There was never ambi...ambivalent feelings about it. It was just a—almost trying to convince yourself—saying it to yourself—to give you the strength to turn your back on your own children, you know. I mean, it must have been a terrible, terrible decision.

And when they took you to the train station...

Well, when they took us to the train station they took us first to my grandparents house, and I remember sitting on my grandfather's knee and he had this big beard

and I always hated it because it pri...it was so prickly. But this time I didn't mind. And, and my grandmother who was completely blind—she sort of went over me with her fingers as if she wanted to remember, you know, every bone, every part of my face—my, my, my face, as if she wanted imprinted on her sightless eyes. You know, it, it was incredibly, sort of, moving. But I still kept sa... saying to myself, "We'll be back within a year." And it wasn't until we were in the train in the station and until when our parents, sort of, picked up their faith. But as the train started to leave I could see anguish on their faces.

Did anyone cry?

I did. And then, I mean, you know, it was dark, wasn't it? And, and, and they were sort of, in those—there were steam trains and there was steam pouring. Uh. And uh, I was lucky because my sister was next to me and she put her arm around me and she said uh, "Don't cry, you always have me. I might be a sore, poor substitute, but remember you always have me—turn to me, please, if you're lonely, if you're homesick." You know, and um, I mean, I didn't like her very much in the old days because she was bossy and clever and all the things I wasn't. But from that moment on she was the best sister in the world.

Do you have that memory of steamy platform and...

Yes.

...waving goodbye?

Oh yes, I think those sort of memories never leave you, because it was such a turning point in our lives.

Is it a daily occurrence—something comes into your mind that...

No, definitely not a daily occurrence. Look, I mean, I had the chance, which very few people have, of keeping my parents alive through my books, right. And, and it makes me proud that I can do it, and so glad that I can bring understanding to the younger generation, you know, through the book—or through the books really. Because, because they can identify with me as the little girl I was then with my—and growing up. You know, and in the—these extreme circumstances we had to grow up.

So you were grown up at age eleven.

Hm?

You grew up at age eleven.

Really, yes.

You—oh...

To a big, to a big extent.

Do you have a kind of reaction getting on a train?

No, I do when I am in Czecho. You know, if I go to my hometown, which is outside Prague, they still use exactly the same train as when I was, you know, ten years old. And they still—you don't have a platform, you know, you're just stuck out in the middle of nowhere and you make sure that there's nothing coming either way and, you know, you run across. And that's always—I can almost smell uh, how they were and also the seats are hard as they were in 19...uh, uh, when was it, 1939?

So you left in July 1939.

Yes, 1st of July. And, I think one of the nicest thing that happened to me recently—Sue was—I had a few—the Czechs had made a film of my life called “Identity of Being a Gissing.” It was an excellent film, which had been shown twice to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war. And *Pearls of Childhood* was uh, uh, read unabridged at the same time, you know, during that same period. And I was told that there never had been any such a reaction—positive reaction, to the book, so it was repeated again. So, you know, I thought, I, I didn’t feel proud for myself, I felt proud for my parents. If it hadn’t been for them telling me to write, you know, and to keep in touch and everything, I wouldn’t have had the material.

And as a child you don’t remember any resentment of being sent, sent away. You never felt that way, this was for your own good.

Uh, you mean from my...

From your parents.

...from my parents, resentment.

I mean—did any of the children feel that they were being sent...

Oh yes.

...away by their parents?

Yes, yes, I think, that, when um, Nicky Winton came on the scene it was uh, 1988, just as my *Pearls of Childhood* was at the printers. And we had this meeting, you know, we had get togethers, and he actually told us that there were some that they felt—as you say—they felt resentment that the parents wanted to get rid of them. Or there were also other children who, although they didn’t want

their parents to die—they were the younger ones—they'd forgotten their language, they'd forgotten when their parents even looked like, you know, because they were perhaps six, seven years old. And they were dreading going back. They didn't want their parents dead, but they had accepted that the English people they were with—you know, it, it was quite a mixture, quite a mixture.

So there was some identity...

Mm.

...crisis for...

Oh yeah, oh yeah.

...some of the children. Hidden Children frequently have that.

Well, I'm not surprised Hidden Children have it because I—I mean, they were really uh, in a, in a different situation, which was more horrific because, I mean, we were loved or liked at least and looked after. You know, there was the odd person—an odd child perhaps who didn't such a positive um, experiences as uh, I had and my sister had. Uh, but on the whole, on the whole, we were very lucky. And whatever happened, even, you know, even if somebody made you uh, scrub the floors or whatever, at least we were alive.

Alive.

And I remember that when I found—or I was given after going back to Prague at, at the end of the war—a letter which my mother wrote to say goodbye to my sis...and I was living with my auntie—the one who's my mother sister who buried mother in, in Belsen. I cried my eyes out after I read it and I said, "I should have been with them," you know, "I should have been there to hold their

ha...hand and everything.” And my aunt just went ballistic, she said, “Don’t you dare say that, don’t you ever dare say that. Don’t you realize that the one happiness both your mother and father had—and I,” she said, “was knowing, in safe hands in England.” And so, it’s...

Nothing’s simple, is it?

No, life isn’t simple. But you asked me about my identity and I just wanted to say that I was torn into shreds about wondering where is my niche? Where do I belong? And then when—after the war and when Dubček was um, in office, my husband uh, had had a very bad coronary and he decided he’d take me to Prague first. You know, I hadn’t been since I ran away in uh, as I said, in ’6...’68—in ’48, sorry. And uh, it was—yes, it was when we were there—one of our colleagues from ??? one day took my husband and me to the Jewish Museum. And I don’t know if you’ve been to the Prague Jewish Museum, but there’s a—it’s a little old museum—synagogue, really—museum. When our—the walls are lined with all the names of the Jews who perished including—that they were in there then. All there was—little round staircase, and at the top there was a little room, and it had like a tree trunk in the middle with a notice just pinned to it, and scribblings of drawings round the walls. And the words from the notice board said, “This is all that remains of the fifteen thousand Czech Jewish children.”

Children.

And at that moment I saw my cousins in those pictures, I saw myself in those pictures and I—for the first time it hit me that would have been all that remained of, you know, if it hadn’t been—I didn’t know about Nicholas Winton—but for

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my parents' courage. And I remember sort of just leaving my husband who was looking at it from a different perspective, because of co...perspective because he wasn't so connected obviously from that angle. And I ran up the rest of the staircase with just uh, "Entry forbidden," but—and there at the top stood Ula, this friend from my class from the Czech school. And the tears were running down his eyes. It—I could tell he felt just like me, and we just held each other and cried together like two children who were so lost themselves. But it was there in that little Jewish Museum that I found my identity. I realized I was proud to be Jewish, but I was Jewish by race, Czech by birth, and English by choice, a mixture of all three.

That may be a good place to stop.

Thank you.